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*Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays War and Warrior, edited by Ernst Jünger**

by Walter Benjamin

Léon Daudet, the son of Alphonse Daudet, who was himself an important writer and a leader of France's Royalist Party, once gave a report in his *Action Français* on the *Salon de l'Automobile* which concluded, in perhaps somewhat different words, with the equation: "L'automobile c'est la guerre." This surprising association of ideas was based on the perception of an increase in technical artifacts, in power sources, and in tempo generally that the private sector can neither absorb completely nor utilize adequately but that nonetheless demand vindication. But vindication can only occur in antithesis to a harmonious balance, in war, and the destructive power of war provides clear evidence that social reality was not ready to make technology its own organ, and that technology was not strong enough to master the elemental forces of society. Without approaching the surface of the significance of the economic causes of war, one may say that the harshest, most disastrous aspects of imperialist war are in part the result of the gaping discrepancy between the gigantic power of technology and the minuscule moral illumination it affords. Indeed, according to its economic nature, bourgeois society cannot help but insulate everything technological as much as possible from the so-called spiritual, and it cannot help but resolutely exclude technology's right of co-determination in the social order. Any future war will also be a slave revolt of technology.

Today factors such as these determine all questions of war and one would hardly expect to have to remind the authors of the present volume of this, nor to remind them that these are questions of imperialist war. After all, they were themselves soldiers in the World War and, dispute what one may, they indisputably proceed from the experience of this war. It is therefore quite astonishing to find, and on the first page at that, the statement that "it is of secondary importance in which century, for which ideas, and with which weapons the fighting is done." What is most astonishing about this statement is that its author, Ernst Jünger, is thus adopting one of the principles of pacifism, and pacifism's clichéd ideal of peace have little to criticize each other for. Even

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the most questionable and most abstract of all its principles at that. Though for him and his friends it is not so much some doctrinaire schema that lies behind this as it is a deep-rooted and — by all standards of male thought — a really rather depraved mysticism. But Jünger's mysticism of war and pacifism's clichéd ideal of peace have little to criticize each other for. Even the most consumptive pacifism has one thing over its epileptically frothing brother for the moment; a certain contact with reality, at least, some conception of the next war.

The authors like to speak — emphatically — of the “First World War.” Yet how little their experience has come to grips with that war's realities — which they refer to in an alienated exaggeration as the “wordly-real” — is shown by the altogether thoughtless obtuseness with which they view the idea of future wars without any conception of them. These trailblazers of the *Wehrmacht* could almost give one the impression that the uniform represents their highest end, most desired by all their heartstrings, and that the circumstances under which one dons the uniform are of little importance by comparison. This attitude becomes more comprehensible when one realizes, in terms of the current level of European armaments, how anachronistic is their espoused ideology of war. These authors nowhere observe that the new warfare of technology and material [*Materialschlacht*] which appears to some of them as the highest revelation of existence, dispenses with all the wretched emblems of heroism that here and there have survived the World War. Gas warfare, in which the contributors to this book show conspicuously little interest, promises to give the war of the future a face which permanently displaces soldierly qualities by those of sports; all action will lose its military character and war will assume the countenance of record-setting. The most prominent strategic characteristic of such warfare consists in its being waged exclusively and most radically as an offensive war. And we know that there is no adequate defense against gas attacks from the air. Even individual protective devices, gas masks, are of no use against mustard gas and Levisit. Now and then one hears of something “reassuring” such as the invention of a sensitive listening device that registers the whir of propellers at great distances. And a few months later a soundless airplane is invented. Gas warfare will rest upon annihilation records, and will involve an absurd degree of risk. Whether its outbreak will occur within the bounds of international law — after prior declarations of war — is questionable; but its end will no longer be concerned with such limitations. Since gas warfare obviously eliminates the distinction between civilian and military personnel, the most important basis of international law is removed. The last war has already shown that the total disorganization imperialist war entails, and the manner in which it is waged, threaten to make it an endless war.

More than a curiosity, it is symptomatic that something written in 1930 about “war and warriors” overlooks all this. It is symptomatic that the same boyish rapture that leads to a cult, to an apotheosis of war, is here heralded particularly by von Schramm and Günther. The most rabidly decadent

origins of this new theory of war are emblazoned on their foreheads: it is nothing other than an uninhibited translation of the principles of *l'art pour l'art* to war itself. But if, even on its home grounds, this theory tends to become a mockery in the mouths of mediocre adepts, its outlook in this new phase of war is disgraceful. Who could imagine a veteran of the Marne or someone who fought at Verdun reading statements such as these: "We conducted the war on very impure principles . . . Real fighting from man to man, from company to company, became rarer and rarer . . . Certainly the front-line officers often made the war artless . . . For though the inclusion of the masses, the lesser blood, the practical bourgeois mentality, in short the common man, especially in the officers' and non-commissioned officers' corps, the eternally aristocratic elements of the soldier's trade were increasingly destroyed." Falser notes could hardly be sounded, more inept thoughts could not be set down on paper, more tactless words could not be uttered. The authors' absolute failure here is the result — despite all the talk about the eternal and the primeval — of their unrefined, thoroughly journalistic haste to capitalize from the actual present without grasping the past. Yes, there have been cultic elements in war. They were known in theocratically constituted communities. As harebrained as it would be to want to return these submerged elements to the zenith of war, it would be equally embarrassing for these warriors on their intellectual flight to learn how far a Jewish philosopher, Erich Unger,* has gone in the direction they missed. And it would be embarrassing for them to see to what extent his observations — made, if in part with questionable justice, on the basis of concrete data from Jewish history — would cause the bloody schemes conjured up here to evaporate into nothingness. But these authors are not capable of making anything clear, of calling things by their names. War: "eludes the usual economy exercised by the mind; there is something inhuman, boundless, gigantic in its Reason, something reminiscent of a volcanic process, an elemental eruption, . . . a colossal well of life directed by a painfully deep, cogently unified force, led to battlefields already mythic today, used up for tasks far exceeding the range of the currently conceivable." Only an awkward lover is so loquacious. And indeed these authors are awkward in their embrace of thought, too. One has to bring them back to it repeatedly, and that is what we will do here.

And the point is this: War — the "eternal" war that they talk about so much here, as well as the most recent one — is said to be the highest manifestation of the German nation. It should be clear that behind their "eternal" war lies the idea of cultic war, just as behind the most recent war lies that of technological war, and it should also be clear that these authors have had little success in perceiving these relationships. But there is

* Erich Unger (1887–1952), member of the Oskar Goldberg circle of Kabbalistic studies and critic of empiricism from a magical and mystical viewpoint. (Ed.)

something rather special about this last war. It was not only one of material warfare but also a war that was lost. And in that special sense it was the German war. To have waged war out of their innermost existence is something that other peoples could claim to have done. But to have lost a war out of their innermost existence, this they cannot claim. What is special about the present and latest stage in the controversy over the war, which has convulsed Germany since 1919, is the novel assertion that it is precisely this loss of the war that is characteristically German. One can call this the latest stage because these attempts to come to terms with the loss of the war show a clear pattern. These attempts began with an effort to pervert the German defeat into an inner victory by means of confessions of guilt which were hysterically elevated to the universally human. This political position, which supplied the manifestoes for the course of the decline of the West, faithfully reflected the German "revolution" made by the Expressionist avant-garde. Then came the attempt to forget the lost war. The bourgeoisie turned to snore on its other side — and what pillow could have been softer than the novel. The terrors endured in those years became the down filling in which every sleepyhead could easily leave his imprint. What finally distinguishes this latest effort from earlier ones in the process involved here is the tendency to take the loss of the war more seriously than the war itself. What does it mean to win or lose a war? How striking the double meaning is in both words! The first, manifest meaning, certainly refers to the outcome of the war, but the second meaning — which creates that peculiar hollow space, the sounding board in these words — refers to the totality of the war and suggest how the war's outcome also alters the enduring significance it holds for us. This meaning says, so to speak, the winner keeps the war in hand, it leaves the hands of the loser; it says, the winner conquers the war for himself, makes it his own property, the loser no longer possesses it and must live without it. And he must live not only without the war *per se* but without every one of its slightest ups and downs, every subtlest one of its chess moves, every one of its remotest actions. To win or lose a war reaches so deeply, if we follow the language, into the fabric of our existence that our whole lives become that much richer or poorer in symbols, images and sources. And since we have lost one of the greatest wars in world history, one which involved the whole material and spiritual substance of a people, one can assess the significance of this loss.

Certainly one cannot accuse those around Jünger of not having taken this into account. But how did they approach it, monstrous as it was? They have not stopped the battle yet. They continued to celebrate the cult of war when there was no longer any real enemy. They complied with the desires of the bourgeoisie, which longed for the decline of the West, the way a schoolboy longs for a inkblot in place of his wrong answer. They spread decline, preached decline wherever they went. Not even for a moment were they capable of holding up to view — instead of doggedly holding onto — what had been lost. They were always the first and the bitterest to oppose coming

to one's senses. They ignored the great opportunity of the loser — which the Russians had taken advantage of — to shift the fight to another sphere until the moment had passed and the nations of Europe had sunk to being partners in trade agreements again. "The war is being *administered*, not *led* anymore," one of the authors complains. This was to be corrected by the German "post-war war" (*Nachkrieg*). This *Nachkrieg* was as much a protest against the war that had preceded it, as it was a protest against its civilian character. Above all, that despised rational element was to be eliminated from war. And to be sure this team bathed in the vapors rising out of the jowls of the Fenriswolf. But these vapors were no match for the [mustard] gases of the yellow-cross grenades. Such humbug about this arch-Germanic fate acquired a moldy luster when set against the stark background of military service in army barracks and impoverished families in civilian barracks. And without subjecting that false luster to materialist analysis, it was possible even then for a free, knowing, and truly dialectical spirit such as Florens Christian Rang* — whose biography better exemplifies the German than whole hordes of these desperate characters — to counter their sort with enduring statements: "The demonic belief in fate, that human virtue is superfluous, — the dark night of defiance which burns up the victory of the forces of light in the universal conflagration of the gods, . . . this apparent glory of the will in this belief in death in battle, without regard for life, flinging it down for an idea — this cloud-impregnated night that has hovered over us for millennia and which, instead of stars, gives us only stupefying and confusing thunderbolts to guide the way, after which the night only envelops us all the more in darkness: this horrible world view of world-death instead of world-life, whose horror is made lighter in the philosophy of German Idealism by the notion that behind the clouds there is after all a starry sky, this fundamental German spiritual tendency in its depth lacks will, does not mean what it says, is a crawling, cowardly, know-nothingness, a desire not to live but also a desire not to die either: . . . For this is the German half-attitude towards life; indeed; to be able to throw it away when it doesn't cost anything, in the moment of intoxication, with those left behind cared for, and with this short-lived sacrifice surrounded by an eternal halo."

But in another statement in the same context, Rang's language may sound familiar to those around Jünger: "Two hundred officers, prepared to die, would have sufficed to suppress the revolution in Berlin — as in all other places; but not one was to be found. No doubt many of them would actually have liked to come to the rescue, but in reality — not actuality — nobody quite wanted to begin, to put himself forward as the leader, or to proceed individually. They preferred to have their epaulets ripped off in the streets." Obviously the man who wrote this knows from his very own experience the attitude and tradition of those who have come together here. And

* Florens Christian Rang, a close friend of Walter Benjamin's until his premature death in 1924. Rang incorporated Benjamin's ideal of an authentic and radical German spirit. (Ed.)

perhaps he continued to share their enmity to materialism until the moment that they created the language of material warfare.

If at the beginning of the war supplies of idealism were provided by order of the state, the longer the war lasted the more the troops had to depend on requisitions. Their heroism turned more and more gloomy, fatal and steel-gray; glory and ideals beckoned from ever more remote and nebulous spheres; and those who saw themselves less as the troops of the World War than as the executors of the *Nachkrieg* more and more took up the stance of obstinate rigor. Every third word in their speeches is "stance." Who would deny that the soldier's position is one of stance? But language is the touchstone for each and every position taken, and not just, as is so often assumed, for that of the writer. But those who have conspired here do not pass the test. Jünger may echo the nobel dilettantes of the seventeenth century in saying that the German language is a primeval language, but he betrays what he means when he adds that as such it inspires an insurmountable distrust in civilization and in the cultivated world. Yet the world's distrust cannot equal that of his own countrymen when the war is presented to them as a "mighty revisor" that "feels the pulse" of the times, that forbids them "to do away with" "a tried and proven conclusion," and that calls on them to intensify their search for "ruins" "behind gleaming varnish." Far more shameful than these offenses, however, is the smooth style of these purportedly rough-hewn thoughts which could grace any newspaper editorial; and more distressing yet than the smooth style is the mediocre substance. "The dead," we are told, "went in their death from an imperfect reality to a perfect reality, from Germany in its temporal manifestation to the eternal Germany." This Germany "in its temporal manifestation" is of course notorious, but the eternal Germany would really be in a bad way if we had to depend on the testimony of those who so glibly invoke it. How cheaply they purchased their "solid feeling of immortality," their certainty that "the terrors of the last war have been frightfully exaggerated," and their symbolism of "blood boiling inwardly!" At best, they fought the war that they are celebrating here. However, we will not tolerate anyone who speaks of war, yet knows nothing but war. Radical in our own way, we will ask: Where do you come from? And what do you know of peace? Did you ever encounter peace in a child, a tree, an animal, the way you encountered a patrol in the field? And without waiting for you to answer, we can say No! It is not that you would then not be able to celebrate war, more passionately than now; but to celebrate it in the way you do would be impossible. How would Fortinbras have borne witness to war? One can deduce how he would have done it from Shakespeare's technique: Just as he reveals Romeo's love for Juliet in the fiery glow of its passion by presenting Romeo as in love from the outset, in love with Rosalinde, he would have had Fortinbras begin with a passionate eulogy of peace so enchanting and mellifluously sweet that, when at the end he raises his voice all the more passionately in favor of war, everyone would have wondered with a shudder: What are these powerful,

nameless forces that compel this man, wholly filled with the bliss of peace, to commit himself body and soul to war? — But there is nothing of that here. These are professional freebooters speaking. Their horizon is fiery but very narrow.

What do they see in their flames? They see — here we can entrust ourselves to F.G. Jünger — a transformation: “lines of psychic decision cut across the war; transformations undergone by the war are paralleled by transformations undergone by those fighting it. These transformations become visible when one compares the vibrant, buoyant, enthusiastic faces of the soldiers of August 1914 with the fatally exhausted, haggard, implacably tensed faces of the 1918 veterans of machine warfare. Looming behind the all too sharply arched curve of this fight, their image appears, molded and moved by a forceful spiritual convulsion, by station after station along a path of suffering, battle after battle, each the hieroglyphic sign of a strenuously advancing work of destruction. Here we have the new type of soldier schooled in those hard, sober, bloody and incessant campaigns of attrition. This is a soldier characterized by the tenacious hardness of the born fighter, by a manifest sense of solitary responsibility, of psychic abandonment. In this struggle, which proceeded on increasingly deeper levels, he proved his own mettle. The path he pursued was narrow and dangerous, but it was a path leading into the future.” Wherever precise formulations, genuine accents or solid reasoning are encountered in these pages, the reality portrayed is that of Ernst Jünger’s “total mobilization” or Ernst von Salomon’s “landscape of the front.” A liberal journalist who recently tried to get at this new nationalism under the heading of “Herosim out of Boredom” fell, as one can see here, a bit short of the mark. This soldier type is a reality, a surviving witness to the World War, and it was actually this “landscape of the front,” his true home, that was being defended in the *Nachkrieg*. This landscape demands further attention.

It should be said as bitterly as possible: in the face of this “landscape of total mobilization” the German feeling for nature has had an undreamed-of upsurge. The pioneers of peace, those sensuous settlers, were evacuated from these landscapes, and as far as anyone could see over the edge of the trench, the surroundings become a problem, every wire entanglement an antinomy, every barb a definition, every explosion a thesis; and by day the sky was the cosmic interior of the steel helmet and at night the moral law above. Etching the landscape with flaming banners and trenches technology wanted to recreate the heroic features of German Idealism. It went astray. What is considered heroic were the features of Hippocrates, the features of death. Deeply imbued with its own depravity, technology gave shape to the apocalyptic face of nature and reduced nature to silence — even though this technology had the power to give nature its voice. Instead of using and illuminating the secrets of nature via a technology mediated by the human scheme of things, the new nationalists’ metaphysical abstraction of war signifies nothing other than a mystical and unmediated application of

technology to solve the mystery of an idealistically perceived nature. "Fate" and "hero" occupy these authors' minds like Gog and Magog, yet they devour not only human children but (new ideas) as well. Everything sober, unblemished, naive and humanistic ends up between the worn teeth of these Molochs who react with the belches of 42cm. mortars. Linking heroism with machine warfare is sometimes a bit hard on the authors. But this is by no means true to all of them, and there is nothing more revealing than the whining digressions exposing their disappointment in the "form of the war" and in the "senselessly mechanical machine war" of which these noble fellows "had evidently grown bored." Yet when one or another of them attempts to look things squarely in the eye, it becomes obvious how very much their concept of the heroic has surreptitiously changed; we can see how much the virtues of hardness, reserve and implacability they celebrate are in fact less those of the soldier than those of the proven class militant. What developed here, first in the guise of the World War volunteer and then in the mercenary of the *Nachkrieg*, is in fact the dependable fascist class warrior. And what these authors mean by nation is a ruling class supported by this caste, a ruling class — accountable to no one, and least of all to itself, enthroned on high — which bears the Sphinx-like countenance of the producer who very soon promises to be the sole consumer of his commodities. Sphinx-like in appearance, the fascists' nation thus takes its place as a new economic mystery of nature alongside the old. But this old mystery of nature, far from revealing itself to their technology, is exposing its most threatening feature. In the parallelogram of forces formed by these two — nature and nation — war is the diagonal.

It is understandable that the question of "governmental checks on war" arises in the best, most well-reasoned essay in this volume. For in this mystical theory of war, the state naturally plays more than a minor role. These checks should not for a moment be understood in a pacifist sense. Rather, what is demanded of the state is that its structure and its disposition adapt themselves to, and appear worthy of, the magical forces that the state itself must mobilize in the event of war. Otherwise it will not succeed in bending war to its purpose. It was this failure of the powers of state in the face of war that instigated the first independent thinking of the authors gathered here. Those military formations ambivalently hovering between comradely brotherhoods and regular government troops at the end of the war very soon solidified into independent, stateless mercenary hordes. And the captains of finance, the masters of the inflation to whom the state was beginning to seem a dubious guarantor of their property, knew the value of such hordes. They were available for hire at any time, like rice or turnips, by arrangement through private agencies or the *Reichswehr*. Indeed, the present volume retains a resemblance to a slogan-filled recruiting brochure for a new type of mercenary, or rather *condottiere*. One of its authors candidly declares: "The courageous soldier of the Thirty Years' War sold himself life and limb, and that is still nobler than simply selling one's politics

or one's talents." Of course, when he adds that the mercenary of Germany's *Nachkrieg* did not sell himself but gave himself away, then this is of a piece with the same author's comment on the comparatively high pay of these troops. This was pay which distinguished these warriors just as clearly as the technical necessities of their trade: as war engineers of the ruling class, they were the perfect complement to the managerial functionaries in their cutaways. God knows their designs on leadership should be taken seriously; their threat is not ludicrous. In the person of the pilot of a single airplane full of gas bombs such leadership embodies all the absolute power which, in peacetime, is distributed among thousands of office managers — power to cut off a citizen's light, air and life. This simple bomber-pilot in his lofty solitude, alone with himself and his God, has power-of-attorney for his seriously stricken superior, the state, and wherever he puts his signature no more grass will grow — and that is the "imperial" leader the authors have in mind.

Until Germany has broken through the entanglement of such Medusa-like beliefs that confront it in these essays, it cannot hope for a future. Perhaps the word loosened would be better than broken through, but this is not to say it should be done with kindly encouragement or with love, both of which are out of place here; nor should the way be smoothed for argumentation, for that wantonly persuasive rhetoric of debate. Instead, all the light that language and reason still afford should be focused upon that "primal experience" from whose barren gloom this mysticism crawls forth on its thousand unsightly conceptual feet. The war that this light exposes is as little the "eternal" one which these new Germans now worship as it is the "final" war that the pacifists carry on about. In reality that war is only this: The one, fearful, last chance to correct the incapacity of peoples to order their relationships to one another in accord with the relationship they possess to nature through their technology. If this corrective effort fails, millions of human bodies will indeed inevitably be chopped to pieces and chewed up by iron and gas. But even the habitues of the chthonic forces of terror, who carry their volumes of Klages in their packs, will not learn one-tenth of what nature promises its less idly curious, but more sober children, who possess in technology not a fetish of doom but a key to happiness. They will demonstrate this sobriety the moment they refuse to acknowledge the next war as an incisive magical turning point, and instead discover in it the image of everyday actuality. And they will demonstrate it when they use this discovery to transform this war into civil war and thereby perform that Marxist trick which alone is a match for this sinister runic humbug.

Translated by Jerolf Wikoff